



Come and See

Sunday, September 18, 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Gary Noonan

Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:7-19

Friends, it is so good to be here with you today, and I genuinely thank you all for your invite and your warm welcome. I've genuinely felt at home here, and for that I am grateful for the members who have welcomed me and the amazing staff team you have here. You are blessed.

And I'm especially thankful for the friendship I have with your new lead pastor, Dave, and with Mary Elizabeth and the boys. Mary Elizabeth, thank you for putting up with me for the last week. And to bring you all genuine blessings from your siblings in Christ across the pond, my own congregation at Houston and Killellan Kirk.

Let us pray. Spirit, may we not linger here in the echo of your presence, but follow it. Follow it in words and actions, in imagination and creativity, from this place to every place we find ourselves. That what we meet here and find here and discover here is our map to the very edges of our community. So be it. Amen.

I was in Glasgow during the Commonwealth Games a few years ago, and I stumbled upon the marathon. I certainly wasn't running in it. It was going through Glasgow city center, and I saw a table with lots of water and glucose drinks. And these super-fit athletes, sweaty and red-faced, approached the table at the halfway mark. It was warm. Not like the heat you get here, but warm for us Scots. And these athletes ran to the table and opened up the water, or the glucose drinks, and gulped some down to continue on their race. And it struck me, that while most of us here will never run a marathon, we all need to be refreshed to continue on our journey, to continue and finish the race.

I often describe John as a Stephen Spielberg of the gospel writers. He takes us in close on a widescreen lens to the life of Jesus and then narrows down before quickly changing direction. So let's imagine the scene.

It's a scorching hot day. You've been walking for hours. It's approaching noon, the hottest time of the day. The heat is excruciating, you're so thirsty, and you come across a well that's a sensible place to stop and rest, and have a drink. You see a woman approaching with a clay jar in her hand. Great. I can get a drink here. This is really easy, if only.

John changes the camera quickly. You're a Jewish man. You're not permitted to speak to a woman without her husband present. But it's only for a drink.... Surely that's okay as long as those law abiding Pharisees don't see me.

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And then the angle changes again. This is no ordinary woman. This is a Samaritan woman. First of all, the prevailing attitude of Jewish men at that time was it was almost better to be a dog than a woman. That was a central cultural attitude.

And next, even more importantly, she was a Samaritan. Samaritans were seen as a mongrel breed by the Jews who intermarried with people of the region, who were brought there by the King of Assyria during the exile to Israel. Jews hated the Samaritans, and the feeling was mutual.

But we need to really understand this rivalry. This was not Democrat, Republican. This was not even Michigan, Ohio. This was real, bitter hatred that led to bloodshed and even death.

So why is Jesus near this woman? This is a disgrace. He shouldn't have been talking to her, let alone passing the time of day, and asking to share drinking utensils. They were unclean. She was unclean. Ignore her. And move on.

That's what he was expected to do. Isn't that what the good religious people of the day wanted him to do? And all that is before any mention of immorality. The accusation that so often was leveled to this poor woman is that she is a common prostitute. That's the first assumption many make as the ultimate issue. Where does this come from? The mere fact that this woman has had five husbands and is now living with another man. But this doesn't prove immorality.

At the time, marriage kicked in when a woman was widowed, she married the next male in the family line, and this happened to provide security for the widow and to provide an heir for the dead husband. And it was not always recognized as marriage.

So why do we so often label? We label someone's morality, someone's sexuality, someone's color, someone's creed. Nadia Bosweber, at a conference I was at in Glasgow, said, we love labeling in society today. We love calling people out. Why? Because it makes us feel better.

Neither John nor Jesus mentioned this woman as a sinner or a prostitute in the single longest dialogue that Jesus has with anyone in any of the Gospels. And we know Jesus isn't slow at calling out wrongdoing, at challenging people, and calling for repentance. But that's not the case here. Friends, this woman was no sinner. This woman was a poor soul. She's heartbroken. And furthermore, she probably went to that well at noon at the hottest time of day in baking heat because people called her out. That's how people treated her. A woman. What a disgrace. A Samaritan. An even bigger disgrace. And five husbands? Well... No, she's a decent human being who has been written off by society, has been heartbroken, has been ignored, has been called out and named by those good religious folk of her day.

Friends, that still happens today. That's how some of us good religious folk today still treat those on the margins of society. It's not an issue that's being consigned to history. Just after the European Brexit referendum, social media went into meltdown. There were signs in Glasgow city center. A place renowned for its welcome and hospitality. These signs said No Tolerance. And there are pictures of refugees beside syringes, posters decreeing white zones. These signs, albeit a minority, are identifying today's Samaritans. And remember, we don't talk to them. They're a disgrace. Don't make eye contact and walk on by.

But thankfully, that is not what Jesus did. He never judged this woman. He never judged her for being a Samaritan. He never decreed her a sinner. And so often, too often in Christianity, we think we must find sin and forgiveness in every story in the Bible. Moral depravity and repentance. This story is not about immorality, it's about identity.

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Immediately following Jesus revelation to her regarding her marital status, the woman says “I see you are a prophet.” If you see the worst in her, you accuse her of deliberately attempting to take the heat off herself by changing the topic.

But let's consider the theological significance of seeing in John's gospel. To see is often connected with belief. When the woman says, I see you're a prophet, it's a confession of her faith. Jesus has seen her. He's seen her plight of dependence not immorality. He's recognized her just as she is. He's spoken with her, and he's offered her something she's probably never received before – dignity, value, and worth. And she recognizes not only who Jesus is, but also what he offers. He invites her not to be defined by her circumstances, but he offers an identity that lifts her above tragedy. And friends, it leads her to life changing faith.

He's seen her. He's welcomed her without condition. He's given her worth, value, and significance, all of which are foreign to her. When he speaks of her past, he does so knowingly and compassionately and lovingly. Not judging, but loving her for who she is and what she brings.

Jesus has not written a story about morality for us. He's shown us a woman of exemplary faith. The Samaritan woman, unnamed and seemingly of no significance to so many. Unlike those good religious folk of her day, does not come to the well at noon out of shame or embarrassment. Rather, this hottest time of day highlights her faith in the presence of the light of the world. Whilst even the disciples, the disciples were standing around wondering why Jesus was even talking to this woman. She leaves behind all the daily ordinary tasks signified by leaving the water jar behind. And she runs. She runs and runs to tell of this exciting news. To share this life giving faith with her neighbors and her friends. She tells of one who knows and loves us deeply, who loves us just as we are, and who sends us as we are to share and send that love to others. And what does she say to them? She says, come and see. Come and see.

Friends, what in this church has made you so excited and meeting Christ just as you are, that you're willing to run and tell your family and friends, come and see. Come and see the living Christ in this place, who does not judge, and who welcomes you just as you are.

This is a model for church. And locally, it's for you. It's for all of you to go and bring those on the margins of society into this community. To bring them together in love, to build friendships and create community here that's open, open to all people. Where people are welcomed and loved just as they are.

For friends, when you all work together and build a community in love, great things will happen to you.

So with Dave as your new lead pastor, let's make this a “come and see” church. Let's be able to excitedly run from here and tell others – come and see. Come and see how we love the poor, the

marginalized, the mistreated, the ignored. Come and see how we give dignity back to people who have lost it, or have had it taken from them. Come and see how we encounter God creatively. Come and see how we love each other in community. Come and see how we stand for peace. And for justice. Come and see how we're radically generous. Come and see how truly inclusive we are.

Friends, words are easy, words are cheap. Let our message here be come and see how we preach the Gospel always, only using words when necessary.

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. As it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forevermore, world without end. Amen.